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ABSTRACT

At Virginia State College, which has an open-admissions policy, entering freshmen who display serious weaknesses in writing are asked to attend a writing laboratory for two hours each week, in addition to attending their regular freshman writing classes. In the laboratory, students write a series of papers dealing with a particular subject. Teachers, working with students on an individual basis, help students concentrate their attention on a few serious writing problems, which they work on one or two at a time. Teachers distinguish between proofreading errors and errors due to misunderstandings, and they deal differently with the two types of errors. Research conducted in 1975 indicated that students in the writing laboratory made faster progress in reducing the percentage of errors in their writing than did students who were not enrolled in the laboratory. (Attachments to this paper present the results of the research and provide sample writing assignments for two series of papers. (GW)

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THE INTENSIVE APPROACH IN THE WRITING LABORATORY

Mary Julia Street

presented April 1, 1977, at

Conference on College Composition and Communication

Kansas City, Missouri

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First, I would like to give credit to my colleagues at Virginia State, who developed the Freshman English program that my Writing Lab is a part of: many of the ideas underlying our freshman program as a whole came from Professor John F. Butler, of George Peabody College for Teachers.

There are several assumptions about the teaching of writing to poorly prepared students that I have made as a basis for the methods we use in the writing lab at Virginia State: first, that students learn to write by writing, not from reading about writing, studying grammar in isolation, or working exercises (I think all these have their place and can be useful, but only as adjunct activities.); second, that poorly prepared students are often poorly motivated and do not respond well to books; third, that students who have had little academic success often feel isolated from their teachers and therefore mistrustful of them; fourth, that problems in writing come from many different causes and must be attacked in different ways; finally, that helping the student to acquire the forms and syntax of standard written English is a part of our job. I will not be debating here the question of the student's "right to his own language."

The kind of program I am going to describe is expensive to operate as far as manpower is concerned, because it relies more on personnel than on equipment. But if an administrative decision is made, I think the methods we use will do the best job for our students. If students who have very low verbal skills are admitted to college, there are three choices available to the administration and faculty: 1) leave them to their own devices and grade them accordingly, 2) leave them to their own devices and pass them to salve the conscience, or 3) create a program, whatever the cost, that will help them to strengthen their verbal skills.

Virginia State College is a predominantly Black, open-admissions college where the average verbal score last year was 318. Most of our students come

from Virginia, and 85% of them are eligible for some form of financial assistance.

What we have at Virginia State is to select the 10% of the entering freshmen who seem to have the most serious weaknesses in writing and assign them to attend the Writing Lab 2 hours per week, along with their regular Freshman Writing classes. This selection is done by means of a writing sample collected from the students during orientation.

The work in the lab is intensive in several ways. First, the students write very often --almost every time they come to the lab. The concentration is on the development of the short personal experience essay and short expository essay. The student writes a series of papers dealing with a certain subject like embarrassment, prejudice, or sounds; then he goes on to another series. You can see a sample series on the handout I gave you.

We use the subject-series for three reasons. First, this is the kind of approach used in many of our Freshman Writing classes. The student will probably be familiar with thie kind of assignment, and this way the lab and the classroom can reinforce each other. Also, this provides a quick progression from assignment to assignment without the student and teacher wasting time trying to choose a subject for the next paper. And since the student chose the series in the first place, he probably likes it and is interested in it to some extent. Finally, because of the design of the series, the student is pushed into more and more thought about what he is saying. He may be writing off the top of his head on Prejudice #1, but by Prejudice #6 he has probably begun to come to grips with his subject, to be interested in it, to care what he is saying.

This, of course, is right where we want him. When he reaches this point, then he cares about unclear places, punctuation that throws the reader off the track, or faulty usage that distracts from his ideas. Then the lab teacher is there to focus the student's efforts in a constructive way.

This is another way our lab work is intensive. The teachers and the students concentrate their attention on a few serious problems, mainly having to do with the word and the sentence. We don't worry about outline form, topic sentences, vocabulary enrichment, or rhetorical theory. We don't do much with organization. We feel that the classroom teacher can deal better with these things, and that since we have so little time to spend with the student (22 to 24 clock hours) it is more productive for us to focus our efforts. Therefore, we work mainly with problems like missing word endings, wrong end-punctuation, missing words, shifts in construction.

Finally, the teacher and the student work intensively on one or two problems at a time. For instance, if a student comes in in September with fragments, errors in agreement, run-on sentences and comma splices in his essay, the teacher selects one of these and marks the paper just for that, saying, "Well, I see you have five fragments here. Let's work on that first." And that is what they do. But how do they 'work on it'?

A very important and often overlooked step in diagnosing writing problems is distinguishing between the 'proofreading error' and the 'error of misunderstanding.' Many times there is a discrepancy between what students have written and what they thing they've written. For example, often a student who has omitted a word from a sentence puts it in when he reads the sentence to you. The same applies to a word ending. The student may write There were a lot of thing going on and read There were a lot of things going on. I'm calling this a proofreading error because obviously the student who reads things when he wrote thing knows about singular and plural nouns, knows how to form plurals and when to. He doesn't need any more information from a grammar book about this. We know he knows the rule because he made use of it in his speech. What he does not know is how to look objectively at what he's written to see whether

it matches what's in his head.

For this kind of problem, the student is given an assignment on Prejudice #2, for example, and told this: "Write your paper, and if possible let some time go by before you proofread it. Then go to a carrel or an empty room and read it aloud to yourself at least twice. The first time, look for whatever you usually look for when you proofread. The second, I want you to pay attention to nothing but missing endings (missing words, fragments etc.)."

The students usually nods resignedly. At this point in his career as a student he has heard a lot of weird suggestions from teachers, and he knows that usually it all comes out the mixture as before. It often takes some effort on your part to get him to do what you've asked. So you have to ask him before you read the paper, "Did you proofread it? Aloud? Did you find any missing word endings? How many? Where were they?" If you find that the student hasn't done what you want, you send him back without reading the paper. If you don't do this, I don't think you'll ever convince the student you're serious about proofreading or make him serious about it.

When he has proofread the paper, you have him read the paper to you while you look on, showing him the places where he's reading what he hasn't written. Sometimes he'll spot the places himself while reading to you even though he didn't while reading to himself. Sometimes he hay need to learn to the spot the element in question in others' writing first, as suggested by Patricia Laurence in Basic Writing.

The error of misunderstanding, of course, must be handled differently. If the student believes that putting a comma between sentences is an acceptable practice, or that plurals are formed using apostrophes, you have to explain the rules to him and possible provide some drill. If he has dialect interference in his speech that's causing him to write many thing and say many thing, you may treat the 's' like a 'silent letter' that still must be written down

without tampering with his speech at all. After all, how many of us pronounce the 'd' in used to?

The teacher can provide the explanation by sitting down and talking to the student, and I think this is best, because of the dubious success the student has probably had with books. Because of the pressures of time, however, we do have some audio-tutorial tape cassettes as well as workbook-like texts for this.

We like to stay pretty close to the students, even when they use the tapes or workbooks. You can't just introduce the student to the tape player and say goodbye to him until the end of the semester. And we give this material to them in fairly small batches--have them work through a unit on the sentence fragment, for instance, and then write a paper and proofread for fragments. Incidentally, one way to help the student spot fragments is to have him read the paper backwards a sentence at a time.

All this work is done on an individual basis. The teacher works with 5-10 students an hour. Of course, some of them will be listening to a tape or working an exercise during this hour, or for part of it. All the student's work is done in the lab itself--there's no homework, except to think about the topic for the next writing assighment. The teacher markd the paper in front of the student.

One of the problems at Virginia State is that so far the student's attendance is pretty much voluntary. That is, unless the Freshman Writing teacher puts pressure on him to attend, there's really no threat to him if he doesn't. Virginia State suffers from grade inflation like everybody else, and sometimes the student sees no reason to add these extra hours to his schedule.

As a result, attendance at the lab is spotty. Some students attend quite faithfully, while others don't. In spite of this, we get good results with the methods we use. If you'll look at your handout, you'll see that in

a study done in the fall of 1975, the lab student made a greater improvement in 'correctness' than the non'lab student. In reduction of mechanical errors, which include spelling, sentence fragments, comma splices, use of apostrophe, etc., the lab students improved almost twice as much as the non-lab students.

It can be said, of course, that they improved more because there was so much room for improvement, and to a certain extent this is true. But they are also the students whom 12 years of instruction in English has not even brought -close to the standard. It can also be said that an error frequency or 7% is still far too high. This is true, too. An error frequency of more than 2% probably distracts the reader, and interferes with any positive evaluation of what has been written. This figure is given by Barbara Quint Gray in the journal Basic Writing, suggested to her by the work of William Labov in spoken English. An error frequency of 2% is what the average speaker has in his speech.

But when we've brought a student from 10% error frequency to 7% we have made a start. Improvement in composition takes a long time, as Braddock points out in Research in Written Composition, NCTE, 1963, and this is only the beginning.

Developmental Writing Laboratory
Virginia State College

This is a tentative comparison of the progress of the Freshman Writing students to the progress of the Writing Lab students in eliminating "errors" from their writing. This study was done in the Fall of 1975, and although further investigations are being made, it indicates that the lab students made faster progress than the Freshman Writing students in general.

		beginning	ending	%age of improvement
total errors per hundred words	general	5.8	4.6	21%
	lab	10.3	7.0	31%
mechanical errors per hundred words	general	3.6	3.0	17%
	lab	5.3	3.5	34%

Writing samples were taken from the students at the beginning and the end of the semester and the errors were counted. Only those lab students who attended at least ten one-hour sessions were studied.

Developmental Writing Laboratory
Virginia State College

Sample Writing Topic Series:

#1 Describe in detail a situation that seemed particularly embarrassing to you. Tell about this experience in such a way that you communicate how you felt to the reader as much as possible.

#2 Put yourself in the place of an observer of the embarrassing situation which you described in you last paper. Would you as an observer have known for certain that you were watching someone who was embarrassed? Why or why not?

#3 Tell about a time when you saw something happen to someone which would have embarrassed you if it had happened to you, but which didn't seem to embarrass the person it happened to. After you have described the incident, draw a line across the page and try to explain the reason for this discrepancy.

#4 Tell about something in your past which embarrassed you at the time but which wouldn't embarrass you if it happened to you now. Do you still feel "embarrassed" by thinking about this incident? Draw a line and try to explain why or why not.

#1 Tell about something you own that is valuable to you but which would be valuable to no one else. Try to explain why it is valuable to you, and describe it as completely as possible .

#2 Imagine a situation in which the thing you described in your last paper would change in value, either becoming valuable to others as well as you or becoming worthless to you as well. Describe this situation.

#3 Describe something which is valuable in your culture to most people but which would not be valuable in some other culture. At the end of your paper, try to explain this discrepancy.

#4 Tell about something that was once valuable to you but which you no longer value. Describe it in detail and at the end try to explain why the value of it has changed.

These writing assignments were suggested by the following book:

Ralston, Melvin B. and Don Richard Cox. Emblems of Reality: Discovering Experience in Language. Beverly Hills: Benziger Bruce & Glencoe, Inc., 1973.